

Diabetes Risk in Veterans on Antipsychotic Medications

VISN 1 MIRECC health services researchers have shown that veterans diagnosed with schizophrenia have a high risk of becoming diabetic when treated with newer generation, "atypical" antipsychotic medications. New cases of diabetes were detected at the rate of 4.4% per year in a sample of over 56,000 VA patients with a diagnosis of schizophrenia. This rate of new diabetes cases is early eight times higher than the general population rate. The antipsychotic medications are thought to increase diabetes risk mainly by increasing appetite and leading to weight gain. Different antipsychotic medications were associated with more or less risk for diabetes. Newer, "atypical" antipsychotic medications like Clozaril or Zyprexa led to greater diabetes risk than older, "typical" antipsychotics like Haldol and Thorazine. This increased risk for weight gain and diabetes represents a serious drawback to the atypical antipsychotics and counterbalances some of the advantages of the new medications. The atypical antipsychotics have been considered to represent a breakthrough in the treatment of schizophrenia because they provide relief from a broader range of symptoms and have fewer side effects related to abnormal movements. This new study adds to the increasing evidence that Clozaril and Zyprexa increase diabetes risk, suggesting that the choice of medicine needs to include the factor of weight gain. Risk for diabetes increased with a longer period of treatment, suggesting that weight gain occurred progressively over time. This time window could provide an opportunity for doctors to change or discontinue the medications for patients who are gaining weight. Unfortunately, this study showed that VA doctors did not tend to change antipsychotic medications when the patient received a new diagnosis of diabetes. The study authors, MIRECC researchers Douglas Leslie and Robert Rosenheck suggest that these findings should underscore the need for mental health professionals to be alert to weight changes when treating patients with schizophrenia and to monitor blood sugar levels on a regular basis.